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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (CAPTION ADDED)

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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS BATTLEGROUND NO LONGER, MUSTANSIRIYAH
UNIVERSITY RETURNS TO ACADEMIC RESPECTABILITY

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: ePRT Baghdad Northeast Team Leader met in late December with new Mustansiriyyah University Vice Chancellor for Administrative Affairs, Dr. Adil al-Baghdadi, to review efforts to reduce the influence of extremist political and religious groups on campus. Baghdadi described 2009 as a lost academic year due to battles for control between students affiliated with the Sadrism Trend and the Badr Organization, and students affiliated with rival political entities. He noted that still powerful and radical sectarians exist in the student body and among the faculty and administration. Baghdadi highlighted his ambitious plans for reform and his need for financial support in modernizing one of the largest universities in Iraq, with 65,000 students. He predicted that a plurality of students would not vote due to disillusionment with the political process. END SUMMARY.

NEW LEADERSHIP AT MUSTANSIRIYAH UNIVERSITY

12. (SBU) In a December 30, 2009, meeting with ePRT Northeast Team Leader, Vice Chancellor Dr. Adil al-Baghdadi, a professor of business administration who has worked in the Ministry of Higher Education for 30 years, stressed that a new team is in town. He and the University's new President (Ihsan Khadum Shareif), both nominated by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, have been in office since early December. They are Shi'a (the University President is from Najaf and Baghdadi described him as "religious but progressive") and have worked together before. Their immediate mandate is to return the University to academic respectability by, in part, marginalizing the influence of the Sadrism Trend within the University. The University, composed of 12 colleges, has 65,000 students, and as many as 1500 lecturers. At one time favored by Saddam and a redoubt of Ba'athist influence, it has received only minimal financial assistance since 1990. In the past nine months, it has had five Presidents, at one point having three rival administrations simultaneously. (NOTE: In mid-2009 the Ministry of Higher Education appointed a University president who was not recognized by the University's 12 colleges, which continued to recognize the incumbent. Shortly afterwards, a third individual was named University President by the Prime Minister's office. All three have now been replaced by the new University President, who has full faculty support. END NOTE.)

RADICALS REMAIN ON CAMPUS

13. (SBU) Baghdadi described the past nine months as a time when the University could not properly be called an academic institution but was rather a religious and political battleground between student supporters of the Sadrism

Trend and the Badr Organization and students affiliated with rival political entities. (NOTE: The Sadrist and Badr Organization are technically allies within the Iraqi National Alliance. END NOTE.) Baghdadi noted that still powerful and radical sectarians remain in the student body and among the faculty and administration. Student unions were closed last October and some of their leaders were arrested, but before accepting his appointment, Baghdadi negotiated with student leaders, whom he described as intent on retaining influence in, and extracting money from, the University.

UNIVERSITY NOW RUN BY "ACADEMIC RULES"

14. (SBU) Baghdadi believes he has succeeded in returning reputable faculty and administrators to a position of control in daily operations. He described the University as once again being an institution run "by academic rules, not by religious or political rules." He pointed to the absence of religious signs inside the campus (although still prevalent outside), something he said was accepted even by Jaysh Al Mahdi (JAM) for the sake of academic integrity, and to the firing of as many as 50 staff members for corruption. He indicated that salaries going to "ghost employees" had been one mechanism for siphoning off the University's limited budget. He described security within the University as "good," with "risks down 80 percent from 2008." Baghdadi admitted, however, that risks still exist and that his ability to effect immediate change is limited by the danger involved. His strategy is to reduce the authority of radical religious figures as much as possible, and eliminate them over time. He described 2010 as a "test year" to see if the University can truly be returned to the stature it occupied before 2003, and especially before 1990.

FIVE-YEAR PLAN FOR UNIVERSITY REFORM

15. (SBU) Baghdadi has presented a five-year plan to the

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Prime Minister to return the University to academic prominence, but he has more immediate needs. To strengthen the legitimacy of the new administration and undermine the control of religious groups, Baghdadi wants to show students tangible signs of progress now. To that end, he asked for U.S. military financial assistance with several projects. He prioritized these as renovating the central library, upgrading laboratories and rehabilitating classrooms. Baghdadi also mentioned improvements in common areas such as the cafeteria, student center and gardens. In a subsequent meeting, he clarified that his current budget is only USD 100 million, when he needed as much as USD 250 million. Two-thirds of the current budget goes to salaries and the remainder to maintenance and some equipment; none goes to capital improvements. (NOTE: The ePRT will follow up with Baghdadi in the coming weeks to see how the ePRT, Embassy's PAS or brigade might be able to assist. END NOTE.)

STUDENTS NOT YET EXCITED ABOUT ELECTIONS

16. (SBU) The University held a meeting with students December 30 to discuss voting and other avenues of involvement in the March elections. The faculty is also preparing a pamphlet on the elections for the student body. Baghdadi and a colleague were not optimistic about strong student participation in the upcoming elections. They predicted that voter participation overall would be between 40 to 55 percent, with the electorate falling into three categories: those "manipulated by religious sects" who will vote as directed by religious leaders; educated elites disappointed with the al-Maliki government who will vote for change in a secular direction; and a plurality who will not vote because they are disillusioned with the political

process and do not believe that even a change in government will bring about a change in living conditions.

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